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ABSTRACT

Verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication are a vital part of competitive group discussion. Specific nonverbal elements that have been found useful in competitive group discussion include environment, proxemics, kinesics, objectics, and chronemics. For example, equalizing arrangements for the discussion in the best area of a room enhances the environment and places a minimum amount of attention on this variable. The physical distance between members is another important variable, influencing the perceived status and power of members and the weight given to their ideas. An area over which discussants have the most control is kinesics or gestures. By encouraging another discussant with positive facial expressions or discouraging participation with scowls or negative expressions, a group member can influence the kind of interaction that occurs in a round. Objectics, or the dress and personal accessories of a speaker, indicate those individuals with status and power in a group. A final nonverbal dimension is the impact of clocks and time upon the kind of discussion that occurs in a round. All of these elements can influence a judge's perception. To become active and effective members of a discussion, students should consider each of these nonverbal dimensions. (HOD)

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Competitive Live Discussion:

The Effective Use of Nonverbal Cues

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Verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication are inherently a part of competitive group discussion. Although some research has focused on strategies designed to help contestants use these elements to their advantage in competitive discussion (Littlefield, 1979), the apparent lack of research in this area often causes the discussant and/or coach to speculate as to the degree of influence either of these elements has on the outcome of the group's decision-making or on the evaluation of the group by a judge. While the evaluation of a taped discussion relies almost entirely on the verbal and paralinguistic factors, a live discussion necessitates attention to the nonverbal dimensions of communication, as well. Because of the emphasis on nonverbal communication in the live discussion setting, this paper will address some of the specific elements that have been found to be useful for students and coaches pursuing excellence in competitive group discussion.

In the realm of live discussion, verbal and nonverbal elements are present. While the verbal dimensions often focus on the quality and quantity of messages (Barker, Wahlers, Cegala, and Kibler, 1983), several factors shape the manner in which these messages are received by an evaluator: (1) the content must be of interest to an audience; (2) the examples command attention; (3) the information must be clearly presented; and (4) the group must be aware of the image it conveys. Related to the verbal messages are the paralinguistic factors that are concerned with the way something is said or presented to an evaluator (Bormann, 1975).

In contrast, Brilhart (1982) suggests that "...the nonverbal components of messages are equally as important as the verbal in determining listerners' interpretations and responses" (p. 145). Others suggest that the nonverbal elements are more important than the verbal messages (Baird, 1982; and Applbaum, Bodaken, Sereno, and Anatol, 1979). No matter what the degree of influence nonverbal messages have on an evaluator, the style or manner in which these messages are conveyed is a reflection of how the discussants see themselves as speakers in a round of competition. Schroeder (1982) suggests that style influences a judge: "If the students desire success then their style is altered as much as possible within their range of latitude to conform to the winning styles" (p. 6). The degree to which a student changes "style" is clearly reflected in the categories of nonverbal communication commonly identified in the literature: (1) environment; (2) proxemics; (3) kinesics; (4) objectics; and (5) chronemics.

Before advancing suggestions for a discussant in each of these divisions, the functions of nonverbal communication should be presented. Baird and Weinberg (1981) and Brilhart (1982) identify repeating, contradicting, substituting, complementing, accenting, and regulating as key nonverbal functions. Wafford, Gerloff, and Cummins (1977) add the identifying function; while Applebaum, Bodaken, Sereno, and Anatol (1979) address the indicating function, as well. The nonverbal cues that repeat verbal message are useful, in terms of clarity, because they provide a

visual reinforcement for the receiver of the message. A contradicting nonverbal cue serves to provide insight into the motivation, or hidden agenda, held by the sender of a message upon its transmission. When nonverbal cues substitute for words, they force the receiver to speculate with regard to the intent of the sender of the message. A complementary nonverbal cue elaborates upon the degree to which a message is intended. Accenting nonverbally allows a sender to suggest the importance of certain dimensions of the message. The regulating nonverbal cue is most often perceived with regard to participation and communication flow in a group. When a nonverbal cue serves the function of identifying, certain elements inherent in the dynamics at work are more clearly understood. Finally, the nonverbal indicating function enables an observer to recognize dimensions of status, power, and leadership in a group.

Each of these functions aids in supporting the original research done by Birdwhistle (1972) and Mehrabran (1972) suggesting that 65% of meaning is the result of nonverbal signals and 93% of meaning occurs in face-to-face interactive settings. With these functions in mind, the specific categories of nonverbal communication can be addressed.

Environment

The environment in which a live competitive discussion takes place is fixed to a great extent by the tournament director. While settings vary, Mintz (1956) reported that discussants

experience more fatigue, monotony, headaches, discontent, irritation, and hostility in "ugly" rooms than in "nice" rooms.

In terms of recommendations for contestants seeking to address the issue of environment through their nonverbal cues, several suggestions are functionally related. Initially, an effort must be made to equalize the seating arrangement of the members. If a table is available, it should be used. This will provide the discussants with an opportunity to lay out their materials, facilitating the use of information in the round. Second, the contestants should find the best area of the room for the discussion to take place. If sitting near the door or by a noisy heater becomes distracting, the external disruptions may limit the ability of the discussant to hear everyone in the group. Finally, it is important to verbally address concerns about a room's attractiveness or distracting appearance, before the round begins. This element should then be eliminated from the discussion. If a discussant is preoccupied with the room environment, the internal distraction may affect the ability of the discussant to focus on the topic and will be ultimately displayed nonverbally. This will serve to contradict a discussant's effort to appear interested in the subject area and unconcerned about the environment. By equalizing arrangements for the discussion in the best area of the room, the environment will be enhanced and a minimum amount of attention will be directed toward this variable. If individuals demonstrate positive attitudes toward the environment of a discussion round,

their status will be recognized and ultimately rewarded by the evaluator of the round.

Proxemics

The physical distance between members is an element of proxemics (Baird, 1982; Applbaum, Bodaken, Sereno, and Anatol, 1979). In a round of discussion, this distance affects the perception of influence that the judges often uses as one measurement for evaluation. Steinzor (1950) suggested that a discussant's spatial position increases his or her chances of being observed. If a person is observed, he or she has a greater chance to present his ideas. Also, Hare and Bales (1963) conclude that dominant speakers choose central seats.

Functionally, there are several recommendations that might be considered if this research is applied to competitive discussion. First, a discussant should sit in a central location. If this is not possible, each discussant should attempt to equalize the distance between the contestants in order to reduce the influence of the dominant members. Secondly, where a person sits can many times influence how that member is perceived by others. This ulimately affects the degree of status and power ascribed to that individual. Williams (1963) found that extroverts are more comfortable in close quarters than introverts. As a result, less dominant members should seek to establish personal space in the seating arrangement of the group's members. By indicating one's eagerness to participate by moving closer to the center of the

group, the perception of the judge may be postively influenced. A discussant who holds back, in terms of physical closeness, may be regarded as aloof or uninterested. If a judge comes to develop this point of view, the contestants may not be highly successful from the competitive point of view. Third, the physical closeness of the group may also allow for the accenting of certain ideas by group members without the apparent need to repeat them nonverbally. In short the location of a member, the distance between members, the status and power of the members and the accentuation of ideas are all useful ways by which a contestant can make a positive influence on a judge through the use of proxemic indicators.

Kinesics

One of the area over which a discussant has the most control is kinesics, or his or her bodily gestures and movements. Ekman and Friesen (1969) identified five types of gestures: emblems, illustrators, regulators, affect displays, and adapters. These movements allow the discussant to indicate his or her positive or negative feelings regarding other members in the discussion and the ideas being discussed by the group (Baird, 1982; Bormann, 1975). It is through kinesics that most functions of nonverbal communications are realized by a discussant. Most obviously, positive indicators include nods, winks, smiles, and general eye contact. By turning away, establishing barriers with books or body positioning, ignoring others, or generally showing disin-

terest, a discussant is demonstrating negative indicators. These can contradict, substitute, compliment and indicate the nature of a discussant's reactions to the discussion round. Secondly, the face is a source of nonverbal leakage (Mortensen, 1972). By encouraging another discussant with positive facial expressions or discouraging participation with scowls or negative expressions, a group member can influence the kind of interaction that occurs in a round. A third suggestion proposes that if a discussant wishes to be regarded favorably, s/he might take the advice offered by Baird and Schubet (1974); that being, leaders should generally be more active nonverbally in a group. Some practical advice to group members might be to keep hands on the table in order to be able to use them effectively while speaking. A discussant should also face anyone who speaks in a group. By visibly turning in his/her seat, the discussant will give the impression that s/he is actively involved in the listening process of a discussion round. Also, by looking at the speakers, the discussant will encourage reciprocation and enhance his/her image in the eyes of the judge. Clearly, active physical involvement is essential to effective participation in a round of discussion.

Objectics

Objectics can also be an influential factor in the establishment of a discussant's image in a discussion round. The dress and personal accessories of a speaker often are regarded as indi-

cators of status (Brelhart, 1982; Barker, Wahlers, Cegala, and Kibler, 1983). Several studies have supported the assumption that speakers judged to be more attractive have more influence in a group than do speakers judged to be unattractive (Singer, 1964; Mills and Aronson, 1965; and Widgery and Webster, 1969). The functional implications for contestants in discussion are clear (1) be appropriately dressed to enhance credibility with other discussants and the judge; (2) bring sufficient materials, including books, magazines, and papers, to appear properly prepared; and (3) take notes while the round is being held to aid as a future reference. These artifacts may be useful if good arguments or issues are raised that may be expanded upon in future discussion rounds.

Objectics clearly indicate those individuals with status and power in a group. The use of one's glasses or pen may also serve as a regulator if used to indicate the appropriate turn-taking in a group. Without words, objectics can also replace the need for a person to declare status. In all, objectics can serve to demonstrate an individuals recognition that image can influence a judge and also serve as a role model for less experienced competitors.

Chronemics

A final nonverbal dimension is the impact of clocks and time upon the kind of discussion that occurs in a round. Applbaum, Sereno, Bodaken, and Anatol, (1979) suggest that attitudes may be

inferred by the time spent in a discussion. In this area, the recommendations for the discussant are clear. A speaker should attempt to be verbally active in a round within the first fifteen minutes of the discussion. If speakers hold back their participation, they may run a double risk: either they will be perceived as not being prepared to speak or they will be regarded as a noninfluential person and may be excluded from the core of decision-makers in the group (Littlefield, 1979).

Secondly, the amount of time spent on each issue indicates a certain degree of preparedness. For example, if a contestant is aware of the reflective thinking process as a means for problem solving and decision-making, s/he will know that an appropriate amount of time should be spent on each area of this model. If too much time is spent on the identification of the problem and not enough time is designated for the brainstorming, a less than adequate solution may be suggested. Obviously, attention to chronemics is a critical dimension of regulating the time allotted in a round of discussion.

To summarize environment, proxemics, kinesics, objectics, and chronemics are elements of live discussion that can influence the perception of a judge. If a student wishes to be an active and effective member of a discussion, attention should be given to each of these nonverbal dimensions.

Current Coaching Strategies

While advice to discussants in competitive discussion has

been limited, Baird (1982) suggests in general terms that a discussant must be direct, active, and consistent. Brilhart (1982) encourages members to sense the "pulse" of the group. Verderber (1982) makes several useful suggestions: (1) gesture often; (2) encourage participation; (3) keep the discussion focused; (4) summarize frequently; and (5) maintain control in positive manner.

Littlefield (1979) is also specific in his coaching strategies regarding dominant members in competitive discussion. He suggests that discussants should attempt to position themselves in full view of the judge. By doing this, the discussant can gauge the reactions of the judge, as well as, allowing the critic to see the artifacts of the discussant. If this is not possible, discussants should be actively moving in their chairs to demonstrate the involvement that might be missed by a judge who is sitting behind a discussion member. The discussant is encouraged to be well-dressed and confident in the presentation of ideas. Also by leaning forward, a discussant may be perceived as more interested in the subject being discussed. Listening is an important nonverbal element (Swanson and Marquardt, 1974) that can be demonstrated by a discussant. Being alert, looking at a speaker, facing the group, ignoring distractions, responding to others, and taking notes all demonstrate to the judge that involvement is taking place.

As a student or coach approaches discussion as a competitive event, it is important that practice sessions be scheduled for

the appropriate behaviors to be rehearsed. While cooperation is important, there are elements of competition that can make a student stand out in a positive sense and emerge as a winner in a discussion round.

Conclusion

Inevitably, there will be individuals in discussion rounds who will continue to violate the norms discussed here, or will at least complicate the process. However, if the functions of nonverbal communication can be fulfilled in a reasonable manner, a student can expect to emerge as a successful discussant at a competitive tournament.

While the verbal elements of discussion must prevail as judging criteria for a taped discussion, this paper has proposed that a contestant's attention to the nonverbal elements may make the judge more aware of the contestant in a live discussion. Unless a contestant is able to present him/herself in a positive way in the environment determined by a tournament host s/he may be less than satisfied with the evaluation given by the judge in competitive live discussion.

FOOTNOTES

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